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SUBJECT: MEDELLIN'S MURDER RATE CONTINUES TO SOAR

REF: 09BOGOTA519

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The murder rate in Medellin continues to soar, despite a late January GOC push to stem the increase. Medellin Secretary of Government Jesus Ramirez told us murders rose 80% in the city during the first five months of the year, compared with the same period in 2008. Ramirez and others attribute the increase to continued infighting among criminal groups, but said the violence is starting to spill over into the general citizenry. Mayor Alonso Salazar said the city lacks the tools to stop the violence, noting that corruption and interagency bickering have made it harder for the police to fight crime. Ramirez announced a new 30 billion peso (about \$15 million USD) program aimed at tackling the problem on June 11, but it is unclear if that will be enough to reverse the rising tide of killing. End Summary

MURDERS UP, AND SPREADING

2. (C) Medellin Secretary of Government Jesus Ramirez told us on June 5 that Medellin experienced 712 homicides between January and May--an 80% increase over the 394 during the same period in 2008. 196 murders occurred in May, up from 82 last year. As they have in the past, Mayor Alonso Salazar, former Mayor Sergio Fajardo, and Ramirez attribute the increase to infighting among criminal groups seeking to fill the vacuum left by the GOC's May 2008 extradition of Diego Murillo (alias Don Berna). Murillo's crime group--the Oficina de Envigado--controlled crime in Medellin for years (ref A). Colombian National Police (CNP) Commander Oscar Naranjo oversaw a major police push in Medellin in January to try to stem the rise, but achieved little lasting impact.

3. (C) Medellin Personero (Human Rights Ombudsman) Jorge Eliecer Ceballos estimates that 90% of the victims have criminal records or ties. Ramirez agreed that most are criminals, but warned that violence is beginning to spill over to the general citizenry, eroding confidence in municipal institutions. Ceballos argued the rise means that the city's once-highly-touted reintegration program for former paramilitaries had failed, noting that the former paras used the program to infiltrate local neighborhood councils and create a network of supposed civic organizations to further their criminal activities. In addition to drugs, former paras and other criminals control transportation,

construction, gambling, and prostitution. Medellin Public Enterprises head Federico Restrepo said rising unemployment also feeds the violence. Medellin's unemployment rate has jumped from 12% to 18% over the last six months.

SHEER SCALE OF PROBLEM, CORRUPTION,
INFIGHTING, DEFY EASY SOLUTIONS

14. (C) Ramirez claimed the city lacks the tools to deal with the violence. He said the local CNP force has received 50 additional detectives and 350 new uniformed police, which has helped it to boost its presence in 52 neighborhoods. The GOC also deployed 500 soldiers on the city's semi-rural periphery. The problem, said Ramirez, is that Medellin has 280 neighborhoods, and the soldiers lack police skills. CNP commanders say they need another 1200 police to regain control. Medellin has approximately 5200 police to handle two million residents. Ceballos pointed out that the CNP is controlled by national, not local, leaders, and said President Uribe has held several security meetings in Medellin without inviting Mayor Salazar. He said Salazar is committed to fighting organized crime, but noted that Uribe's actions have damaged local confidence in the Mayor's leadership.

15. (C) Police corruption also continues to be a challenge. Ramirez said the CTI, the investigative unit of the Fiscalia (Prosecutor General), believes some elements of the CNP have gone into organized crime and are contributing to the violence. He added that the CNP has had to remove over a third of the staff of the detective section (SIJIN) in Medellin on suspicion of corruption. Ceballos agreed, adding that the public perception of corruption among units like SIJIN has made the public less willing to cooperate with the police. Still, in a recent visit to Medellin's poorer neighborhoods, local residents repeatedly told us they want more police on the streets.

16. (C) Competition among the CNP and CTI also undercuts the effectiveness of anti-crime efforts. Ramirez told us Medellin bought intercept equipment for the CTI with the capacity to listen to 300 lines to fight organized crime groups. However, he said the CTI is only tapping 40 lines, primarily to go after small fish, and refuses to share the equipment with the CNP. Instead, the local CTI has offered the capability to other CTI offices around the country.

UNCLEAR WHETHER NEW SPENDING
WILL SOLVE UNDERLYING PROBLEMS

17. (C) Medellin and the CNP announced on June 11 a new 30 billion peso (about \$15 million USD) program aimed at tackling the crime problem. Ramirez said the city would contribute the funds to help expand the city's surveillance camera program, boost community policing, and put a police station or substation in each of the city's neighborhoods. In exchange, the CNP agreed to boost police manpower in Medellin by 20%. The City Council also announced that it plans to continue current firearm restrictions--firearms were used in about 80% of the city's homicides--and to hike the penalties for illegal use of a firearm. No measures to address internal police problems were announced.

18. (C) Fajardo told us the key to reducing homicides is to continue education and social programs, while also boosting community policing and organized crime-fighting efforts. He argued that despite the current problems, CNP efforts and Medellin social programs have sufficiently weakened the city's narco-trafficking groups to ensure that no future crime leaders will be able to achieve the power of a Don Berna or a Pablo Escobar. Still, he voiced concern that his independent presidential bid--which is largely based on Medellin's success in reducing violence and promoting economic growth from 2003-2007--could make national leaders interested in promoting their own candidacies less responsive to Medellin's security needs.

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